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DE RUEHLP #2104/01 2131921
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 011921Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY LA PAZ
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4514
INFO RUEHAC/AMEMBASSY ASUNCION 6971
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA 4326
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 8211
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES 5456
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 2683
RUEHGT/AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA 0627
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RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 4760
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 5317
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RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA 0448
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RUMIAAA/USCINCSO MIAMI FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS LA PAZ 002104

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: INTRODUCTION TO BOLIVIAN INDIGENOUS ISSUES

REF: A. LA PAZ 1981

[1](#)B. LA PAZ 1877

Summary

[1](#)1. Bolivia has the highest percentage (from 35 percent to as high as 75 percent, depending on the survey) of indigenous citizens in South America, and Evo Morales' near-iconic status as the first indigenous president of Bolivia has made indigenous issues both highly-visible and contentious. But what does it mean to be indigenous in Bolivia? With political and economic decisions riding on this question, it is important to review the concept of 'indigenouness', whether self-defined or imposed by others. What follows is a generalized introduction to provide a base for more detailed reporting in the future.

Statistics: Numbers Big, Small, and Changing

[1](#)2. Although the standard estimate of the indigenous population in Bolivia ranges from 60 to 80 percent, there are significant differences over time and under different survey methodology. The 2001 national census revealed that 62 percent of the population identified themselves as part of an "indigenous or original people." However, the most recent iteration of a biannual survey administered by U.S. professor Mitchell Seligson revealed that 65 percent of the population considered themselves of mestizo or mixed race. In this survey the question was asked in two different ways, and the question which exactly repeated the phrasing of the 2001 census received a response that 72 percent of the population considered themselves indigenous (at the same time that many of the same respondents also considered themselves mestizo.) The biannual Seligson surveys also show a dramatic decrease in self-identification as "white." In 1998, 23 percent of respondents self-identified as white while in 2006 only 11 percent self-identified as white. During that same time period, the percent of respondents self-identifying as indigenous doubled, a mirror image of the trend for whites.

¶3. Significantly, the authors of the Seligson study conclude that this self-identification varies according to whether a person is asked about membership in a specific indigenous group or a generalized "indigenous" identity. For example, respondents were much more likely to identify themselves as members of the Aymara, Quechua, or another specific indigenous group, than to identify themselves as "indigenous" in general. When talking to indigenous leaders, it is common to hear comments about historic clashes between the Aymara and Quechua for example, and indigenous groups of the Altiplano often seem little inclined to join forces with eastern, lowland indigenous groups. (Note: some observers suggest that if a Quechua candidate were to run against President Morales, who is Aymara, it would split the "indigenous vote". President Morales' cabinet includes Quechua ministers, however, and the president is popular in non-Aymara indigenous strongholds, particularly in the countryside. End note.)

¶4. Many observers have suggested that, in pure terms of heritage, the vast majority of Bolivians (whether self-identifying as white or indigenous) are actually of mixed-heritage. Recent reporting suggests that there are 36 indigenous groups in Bolivia. The 2001 census tallied individuals of 15 years of age or older who self-identified as indigenous (total population count for 15-and-older was 5,064,992). The largest groups in 2001 were the Quechuas (population 1,555,641), Aymaras (1,277,881), Chiquitanos (112,216), and Guarani (78,359). A number of indigenous groups have fewer than 200 members, and one group is said to consist of only two families.

Defining Indigenousness

¶5. When asked to list the attributes that contribute to indigenous identity, most Bolivians start with language. The ability to speak one's native language is generally highly prized within local indigenous communities, although some communities report that parents encourage their children to use only Spanish in an attempt to avoid the economic and social stigma still attached to imperfect Spanish. A recent study, "Ethnic and Linguistic Range of the Bolivian Population," indicated that half of the Bolivian population speaks only Spanish, while 33 percent is bilingual in Spanish and an indigenous language, and 12 percent speaks only an indigenous language. The vast majority of Bolivians who speak an indigenous language speak either Quechua or Aymara. Less than one percent of the population speaks an indigenous language other than Quechua, Aymara or Guarani. The survey identified 34 indigenous languages in Bolivia (including Quechua, Aymara and Guarani) and found that in the small communities, only 14 percent of members speak their indigenous languages. The official treatment of indigenous languages is being debated in the Constituent Assembly as part of the draft constitution. The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party has proposed that Spanish be the official language, Quechua, Aymara, and Guarani have status as "principal languages" and that all indigenous languages be protected and encouraged.

¶6. Traditions and customs are another strong source of indigenous identity. In the countryside, the tradition of community justice has survived in many communities (often because the law of the cities didn't reach them.) Since the 2004 elections, reportedly 18 town councils have formalized the use of indigenous customs in local governance. The customs in question differ from council to council, but generally include enhanced community involvement such as monthly "elders" meetings or collective decision making. The concept of community justice is hotly debated, partially due to confusion over its definition (ref A). In the cities, it has become a code word for vigilante justice, including lynching. In the countryside, it refers more to traditional judgments and punishments, generally excluding the death penalty (in many groups traditionally the most severe

punishment was banishment from the community.)

¶7. Land has been and is becoming an even more important part of indigenous identification. Indigenous autonomy, although poorly defined at present, would presumably include some sort of indigenous control over traditionally indigenous territories (ref B describes the various autonomy proposals.) Currently, the MAS party has also proposed that indigenous groups have full rights over natural resources in their autonomous territories (ref A.)

¶8. Traditional dress can also be an indicator of indigenousness. The classic image of "indigenous Bolivia" is an altiplano woman in her traditional outfit consisting of long, full skirts, a shawl, and bowler hat. Although the male counterpart of this outfit (poncho and knit cap with ear-flaps) can still be seen in the countryside, it is extremely rare in the cities, where generally only women still wear traditional garb. Emboff recently attended a meeting of indigenous youth leaders whose participants stressed the importance of traditional dress as a way of maintaining their culture (note: of the 96 participants, only one male student wore indigenous garb, while roughly 20 female students wore at least the full skirts and shawls.)

----- Indigenous Cities? -----

¶9. In addition to the occasional conflicts between different indigenous groups, there is ongoing tension surrounding the idea of indigenous city-dwellers. In their 2006 study, investigators Luis Verdesoto and Moira Zuazo suggest that the continued migration from the countryside to the "mestizo" strongholds of the large cities will weaken ties to indigenous culture and lessen self-identification as indigenous. The sprawling city of El Alto is often cited as the largest indigenous community in Bolivia, but it is hard to see how El Alto could be given any sort of indigenous autonomy, since El Alto residents come from many different indigenous backgrounds (although the majority are Aymara.)

----- Campesino Versus Indigenous -----

¶10. In an example of unintended consequences, the push for indigenous rights has occasionally pitted indigenous groups against campesinos (peasant farmers who are often ethnically or culturally indigenous also). Emboffs have been approached recently by Rufo Calle, head of the Confederation of Campesino Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), for help in a situation where a local indigenous group has claimed land currently farmed by campesino members of CSUTCB. According to Mr. Calle (himself indigenous) "our campesino families have farmed this land for hundreds of years," and therefore they should have just as strong a claim as the small local indigenous group. The campesinos in this case are themselves, in fact, indigenous, but are not members of the local indigenous group that has claimed ancestral rights to the land. A key element of this conflict is the decades-old migration of the Aymara and Quechua from their Altiplano homelands--where they self-identify as "indigenous"--to the media-luna lowlands, where they instantly become "campesinos".

----- Conclusion -----

¶11. Currently Bolivian Law 1257, ratified in July 1991, bases the definition of indigenousness on the Organization for International Migration's convention which includes both a heredity component and the idea of conservation of some or all of the group's original social, cultural and political institutions. Indigenous groups in Bolivia may wish to modify or strengthen that definition in order to concentrate benefits within their communities, or the definition of indigenousness may have to be more clearly codified at a

national level. After centuries of stigmatization, indigenusness may become a political and economic advantage at times, in which case we may see an even greater increase in the number of Bolivians who self-identify as indigenous.

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